

Dynamics of getting to know each other

Collaborative practices require engagement from all participants; therefore, the initial activities where the various groups get to know each other are crucial for establishing trust, common grounds, goals and expectations. This section is dedicated to exploring dynamic tools that can be included in different contexts at the beginning of the collaborative process. Some of the presented tools are inspired and adapted from the book *Participatory Workshops*. (Chambers 2002)

Pick a photo

This tool is intended to create an open and informal moment for participants to get to know each other. The facilitator's preparation for this activity includes selecting and printing several different pictures, which should be as diverse as possible, such as incorporating different landscapes, social practices, foods, cultural elements, abstract images and different objects.

The activity starts with everybody sitting in a circle, either on the floor or around a table, depending on the group or the space available. The pictures are placed in the centre of the group and the participants are asked to select one each. There should be no further explanation of what the participants should be thinking about when choosing a picture.

After everyone chooses a picture, the facilitator explains the activity: each person should briefly introduce themselves (in under a minute) by sharing their name or what they would like to be called, where they are from and a fact about themselves using their chosen picture. These points of names and countries of origin can be adapted to different contexts and answered briefly; therefore, it is better to avoid any questions related to professions or skills.

The third point related to the picture creates an opportunity for people to give whatever information they feel comfortable sharing. On the one hand, this

question avoids asking for personal information that the participants may be too shy to disclose. On the other hand, this question offers the opportunity for people to connect with each other by revealing aspects of their lives other than the practical information given earlier.

Figure 5: Workshop with refugees in Märkisches Viertel Berlin, 2022. Source: Juliana Canedo



For example, some people might choose a picture of a camera and share that their favourite hobby is photography, or they might pick a picture of fruits and say that they miss the taste of the food in their home country. These are two examples that were presented to me on the many occasions that I used this tool to break the ice among research groups. By asking participants to offer a piece of information they are comfortable sharing, but personal enough that it wouldn't usually be shared during initial introductions, we create a collective feeling and, in many cases, a sense that this is a safe space for sharing vulnerable information. This tool contributes to the trust-building process and fosters personal connections by revealing aspects about the participants beyond expertise or professional capacities.

Bring an object

The second dynamic tool is somewhat similar to the first; it differs in that the participants are asked to bring an object to the first meeting that will tell some-

thing about themselves. This activity only works if the group you will engage with is contacted before the first meeting. It cannot be planned when you are visiting a community without any prior arrangement or organisation. Some participants may forget to bring their personal objects; in this case, you can use objects from their surroundings and ask them to discuss them in their presentation. For example, these environmental objects could be natural features, such as trees or water.

Like the previous activity, the participants are asked to give their name, where they are from or similar brief facts and to show their chosen object and explain why they brought it to the meeting. The goal is to connect people through their emotional attachments to their objects instead of getting to know each other only by their 'labels', such as 'I am an architect', 'I am a carpenter' or 'I am 42 years old'.

During my experiences in using this tool, I witnessed the participants bringing heirloom objects that belonged to their family for generations, rocks from their hometown, a spoon with which they cook food for their children, an old picture of a relative and their favourite books, which were almost always followed by emotional explanations. As in the previous activity, this dynamic tool is not intended to force people to overshare but rather the opposite – they can freely decide what they would like to bring and discuss with the group. Depending on the context, asking participants to bring their favourite foods also works as a great icebreaker and can draw out interesting narratives from their lives.

Name and throw

This warm-up introductory tool works well with young groups or groups of children. It can also be a fun way to encourage introductions in adult groups. This game can be played with a lightweight ball, but I find it particularly nice to use a roll of coloured yarn.

The participants should stand or sit in a circle. The game starts with one person holding the yarn roll; this person asks the name of another participant and simply share something about themselves with the chosen participant. Then, they throw the yarn roll to the other participant without letting go of the end of yarn. Then, the next person holding the yarn roll should say something about themselves and then select and throw the yarn roll to another participant, again holding onto the string of yarn. This process will create a network

of yarn that will end when the last person throws the yarn roll to the person who started the game.

The goal of this activity is not only to break the ice through introductions but also to visually create a connection between the participants. The questions asked can vary depending on the group and the context, but they shouldn't be complex or require people to give long answers. The idea is to have a quick, interactive round of introductions.

Meet and greet

This method is particularly effective in settings with larger groups with more than 15 participants where time constraints prevent the possibility of individual introductions. The core idea is to encourage the participants to move around the space and engage in brief, spontaneous, one-on-one interactions, which fosters a sense of connection from the outset. Each participant can introduce themselves in a quick, informal manner by typically focusing on basic information like their name, role and interests. The key to this dynamic tool is the randomness of the encounters, which helps break down initial barriers and create opportunities for diverse interactions among different people.

In addition to their introductions, the participants are encouraged to ask a few short, open-ended questions, which can be as simple as 'What brought you here today?' or 'What is one interesting fact about you?' These questions should be non-invasive, allowing individuals to share only what they feel comfortable sharing, which encourages openness without pressuring anyone to divulge their personal information. As the participants meet and greet each other, this method works to create a more relaxed and inclusive atmosphere, making it easier for individuals to approach one another throughout the rest of the event.

The beauty of the 'meet and greet' method lies in its ability to quickly build rapport in a larger group, setting the stage for further collaboration. It can also help the participants find common ground, uncover shared interests and reduce any social or professional anxieties they might have in the context of a large group. As the participants circulate and engage with each other, the overall environment becomes more dynamic and interactive, facilitating a sense of community from the very beginning.